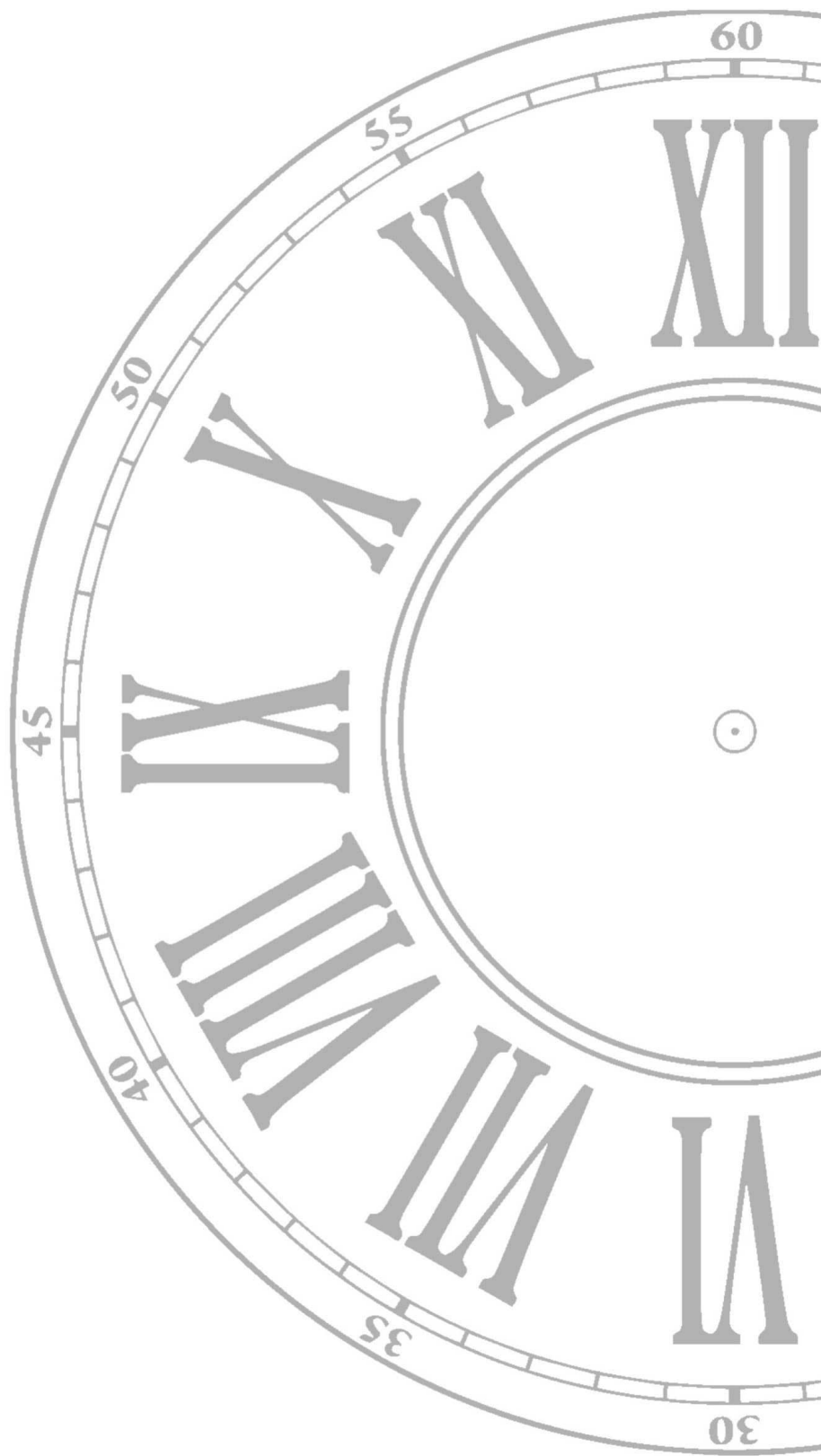


HARUKI
MURAKAMI



THE CITY AND ITS
UNCERTAIN WALLS



ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

FICTION

IQ84

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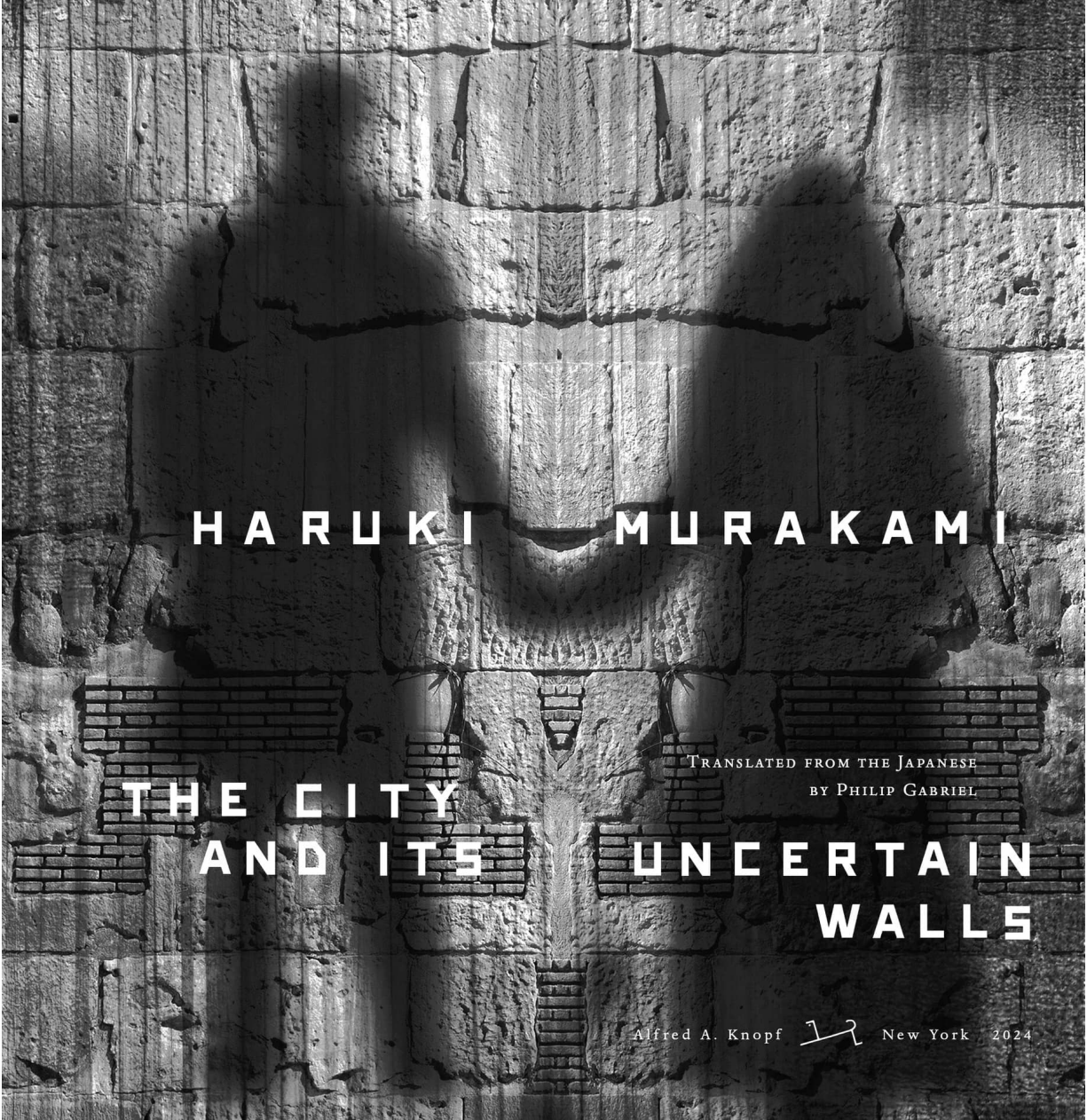
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HARUKI MURAKAMI

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE
BY PHILIP GABRIEL

THE CITY
AND ITS UNCERTAIN
WALLS

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*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*

PART ONE



YOU WERE THE ONE who told me about the town.

On that summer evening we were heading up the river, the sweet fragrance of grass wafting over us. We passed over several little weirs that held back the flowing sand, stopping from time to time to gaze at the delicate silvery fish wriggling in the pools. We had both been barefoot for a while. The cold water washed over our ankles, while the fine sand at the bottom of the river enveloped our feet like the soft clouds in a dream. I was seventeen, and you were a year younger.

You'd stuck your flat red sandals in your yellow plastic shoulder bag and were walking from one sandbank to the next, just ahead of me. Blades of grass were pasted to your wet calves, wonderful green punctuation marks. I was carrying my worn-out white sneakers, one in each hand.

Perhaps tired of walking, you plunked yourself down on the summer grass, wordlessly gazing up at the sky. With a screech a pair of small birds flashed across the sky. In the silence that followed, a hint of bluish twilight began to entwine itself around us. As I sat down beside you, I had an odd feeling, as if thousands of invisible threads were finely tying your body to my heart. The minute movement of your eyelids and the slight flutter of your lips were enough to stir my heart.

At that time neither you nor I had names. The radiant feelings of a seventeen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old on the grass of a riverbank, in the summer twilight, were the only things that mattered. Stars would soon be twinkling above us, and they had no names either. The two of us sat there, side by side, on the riverbank of a nameless world.

“There’s a high wall surrounding the whole town,” you began, drawing out the words from the deep silence, like a diver scouring the seabed for pearls. “It’s not that big a town, but it’s not small enough to absorb in a single glance either.”

This was the second time you’d talked about the town. And now the town had a high wall around it.

—

As you spoke, the town revealed a single lovely river and three stone bridges (the East Bridge, Old Bridge, and West Bridge), a library and a watchtower, an abandoned foundry and communal housing. In the faint light as twilight drew near, we sat shoulder to shoulder, gazing at that town. At times we were on a far-off hill, our eyes narrowed; at other times, the town was so close that we could reach out and touch it, with our eyes wide open.

“The *real* me lives there, in that town surrounded by a wall,” you said.

“So the you that is sitting here next to me isn’t the real you?” I had to ask.

“That’s right. The me here with you now isn’t the real me. It’s only a stand-in. Like a wandering shadow.”

I thought it over. *A wandering shadow?* But I kept my opinions to myself.

“Okay, so in that town what is the *real* you doing?”

“Working in a library,” you replied in a quiet voice. “I work from around five in the evening until around ten at night.”

“Around?”

“All time there is *approximate*. There’s a tall clock tower in the square, but the clock doesn’t have any hands.”

I pictured a clock tower without hands. “So can anyone come into that library?”

“No. Not everyone can enter. You need special qualifications to do that. But *you* can. Since you have those.”

“What do you mean by...*special qualifications*?”

You smiled gently but didn't answer the question.

“So as long as I go there, I can meet the *real* you?”

“As long as you can find that town. And as long as—”

You fell silent, your cheeks reddening a bit. But I could understand the words that you didn't say.

As long as you really are seeking the real me. These were the words you didn't venture to say.

I gently wrapped an arm around you. You had on a light green sleeveless dress. Your cheek rested against my shoulder. But on that twilit summer evening, the you I held wasn't the real you. As you said, it was a mere stand-in, a shadow.

The real you was in a town surrounded by a high wall. In a town with willows on lovely sandbanks, with a few small hills, and quiet beasts each with a single horn. People lived in old communal housing, living plain but perfectly adequate lives. The beasts ate the leaves and nuts from the trees, though most of them passed away in the long, snowy winters, the cold and hunger overcoming them.

How I longed to go into the town. Longed to meet the *real* you.

“The town is surrounded by a high wall so it's very hard to enter,” you said. “And going out is even harder.”

“So how can you go inside?”

“You just need to wish your way in. But truly wishing for something, from the heart, isn't that simple. It might take time. In the meanwhile, you might have to give up all sorts of things. Things that you treasure. But don't give up, no matter how long it takes. The town isn't going anywhere.”

I imagined meeting the real you in that town. I pictured it all: the beautiful expanse of apple trees outside the town, the three stone bridges spanning the river, the cries of the invisible night birds. The small old library where the *real* you worked.

“There's always a place ready for you there,” you said.

“A place for me?”

“Yes. There's only one position open in the town. And you are to fill it.”

What position could that be?

“You’ll become a *Dream Reader*,” you say in a low voice. As if revealing a crucial secret.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You know, I can’t even remember my own dreams. It would be hard for someone like that to become a Dream Reader.”

“No, a Dream Reader doesn’t need to have his own dreams. All you need to do is read all the old dreams collected on the shelves of the library.”

“Do you think I can?”

You nod. “Yes, you can do it. You have the qualifications. And the *me that’s there* will help you do the work. I’ll be right beside you, every night.”

“So I’d be a Dream Reader, and every night I’d read old dreams on the shelves of the library. And you would always be with me. The *real* you,” I said, repeating aloud the facts given me.

Your bare, slender shoulders under the straps of the green dress trembled under my arm. And then stiffened.

“That’s right. But there’s one thing I want you to remember. That even if I do meet you in that town, I won’t remember anything about you.”

Why?

“You really don’t know why?”

I know. The person whose shoulder my arm is gently around here is a mere stand-in. The *real* you lives in that town. That mysterious, far-off town surrounded by a high wall.

Your shoulder under my arm was so soft and warm that it was hard to think of it as anything other than that of the *real* you.



IN THIS REAL WORLD, you and I lived not so far from each other. Not far away, but not so close that we could drop by whenever we wanted. To get to your place took me an hour and a half, changing trains twice along the way. Neither of the towns we lived in was surrounded by a high wall, so of course we could come and go freely.

I lived in a quiet residential area near the sea, while you lived downtown in a much larger, livelier city. That summer I was in my third and final year of high school, and you were in your second year. I went to a local public high school, and you attended a private girls' school in your city. For various reasons, we couldn't see each other more than once or twice a month. We'd take turns—I'd visit your town, then next time, you would come to the town where I lived. We'd walk to a small park near your home, or to a public botanical garden. The botanical garden charged an admissions fee, but next to the greenhouses was a nice little café that was never crowded and it became our favorite spot. We'd order coffee and apple tarts (a bit of a luxury for us) and lose ourselves in quiet conversation.

Whenever you came to my town, we'd walk along the riverside or the sea. There was no river near the downtown area where you lived, and no sea either, of course, and when you came to my town, it was the first thing you wanted to see. You were drawn to all that natural water.